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November 13, 1974

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Comments on the Intelligence Loss Which Would Result from Returning BUFFALO HUNTER Drone Photoreconnaissance Assets from Southeast Asia to CONUS

KEY POINTS

The Military Intelligence Position

-- DIA, the intelligence arms of the three services, CINCPAC, USSAG, and DAO Saigon believe that BUFFALO HUNTER is essential to the mission of military intelligence in Southeast Asia. It provides information of three kinds: contingency targeting information, surveillance of Communist rear areas in South Vietnam, and warning of a Communist general offensive.

-- The return of BUFFALO HUNTER assets to CONUS would seriously degrade the current U.S. intelligence effort on Vietnam.

The CIA Position

-- CIA analysts do not work on the targeting problem, which is exclusively handled by the military intelligence agencies.

-- On any subjects within CIA's area of responsibility, the loss of BUFFALO HUNTER would not be critical so long as SIGINT, high altitude photographic, and human-source collection continues at present levels.

The State/INR Position

-- The withdrawal of BUFFALO HUNTER would provide a political signal to both Saigon and Hanoi that the U.S. was reducing its tactical military support to South Vietnam.

-- For this reason, State/INR believes that, barring a change in U.S. policy toward South Vietnam, BUFFALO HUNTER should for the present be retained in Southeast Asia.

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THE DETAILS

NOTE: Paragraphs 1 through 11 of this memorandum have been prepared essentially by analysts of the Defense Intelligence Agency and represent the views of that Agency. Paragraphs 12 and 13 contain the views of analysts of the Central Intelligence Agency. Paragraphs 14 and 15 contain the views of the Department of State/INR on the political implications of removing BUFFALO HUNTER from Southeast Asia.

1. The BUFFALO HUNTER photoreconnaissance program is flown by a detachment of SAC's 100th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing, operating out of [redacted] An average of 25 drone photographic missions a month are now being flown over Communist-controlled areas of South Vietnam. For each mission, a C-130E aircraft launches the drone, remotely monitors its flight over the reconnaissance track, and then directs it back to [redacted] where it is recovered by a CH-3 helicopter. BUFFALO HUNTER does not, under current guidelines, overfly North Vietnam. Nor does it overfly Cambodia since TACRECCE is currently available there. Its only overflight of Laos occurs while transiting southern Laos at high altitude en route to or from a reconnaissance sortie over South Vietnam. Over the target area, the drone drops to low altitude -- between 500 and 5,000 feet -- and at those altitudes its camera system produces photography of three to five inches resolution. Flight paths are chosen to cover requirements levied by U.S. national intelligence agencies, CINCPAC, USSAG elements, and the Republic of South Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF).

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2. BUFFALO HUNTER offers several unique advantages:

- Being pilotless, the drone eliminates the possibility of manned aircraft being lost with the attendant political complications.

- It can overfly areas where the air defense threat to piloted aircraft is unacceptably high. This is an important consideration because Communist antiaircraft forces in South Vietnam are already at record levels and could grow further.

- The drone's low altitude puts it beneath most cloud cover, so it obtains useful photography when clouds obscure the photography of higher altitude platforms. In Communist-controlled areas of South Vietnam's central highlands,

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where low clouds and poor visibility prevail 30 to 60 percent of the time regardless of season, BUFFALO HUNTER often provides the only photographic coverage available.

- For spot coverage, the quality of BUFFALO HUNTER photography is far superior to that obtained by higher altitude platforms. Truck and ship cargoes, new weapon models, even personnel in transit can be identified better by BUFFALO HUNTER than by any other photographic platform in the theater. (High altitude platforms provide wide area coverage, and coverage of such things as the alignment and extent of construction of new highways and pipelines.)

- Under present schedules, drones are flown more frequently than manned platforms and provide the majority of photography of South Vietnam. OLYMPIC MEET (U-2R) is not currently targeted against South Vietnam and GIANT SCALE (SR-71) at two missions per month, is currently targeted against only northern portions of the country.

3. The information obtained from BUFFALO HUNTER is applied to several intelligence functions. The DIA and the CIA are not in full agreement as to the value of BUFFALO HUNTER's contribution to each of these functions. The DIA position is expressed in paragraphs 3 through 11 of this memorandum. The CIA position is expressed in paragraphs 13 and 14.

Targeting:

- Military intelligence employs BUFFALO HUNTER as the primary source of intelligence for identification and monitoring of potential targets for air strikes within Communist-controlled areas of South Vietnam. It has provided invaluable targeting information to U.S. contingency planning. However likely or unlikely it is that the U.S. will again carry out airstrikes in Vietnam, DIA is still under instructions to engage in such contingency target planning. If BUFFALO HUNTER assets are removed from the Southeast Asian theater, a decision should also be made that this particular function of military intelligence -- detailed target planning in Vietnam -- need no longer be performed.

Wouldn't periodic U-2 or similar give adequate info for general contingency targetting (ie roads, pipelines, depots etc) - which would have to be 'updated' for actual use in same way BH would ?

Maybe

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- In addition to its use in U.S. target planning, much of the "take" from BUFFALO HUNTER photography is also given to the South Vietnamese for their own contingency targeting program. In fact, BUFFALO HUNTER provides about 90 percent of the useable aerial photography available to the South Vietnamese. The percentage is so high because the South Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) has no adequate reconnaissance platforms of its own. Because of funding cutbacks, only three RF-5A's and ten RC-47's remain operational. Neither of these types of aircraft can perform reconnaissance in high threat areas. In addition, their camera systems are inadequate, and fuel restrictions have reduced their monthly operation to 10 flight hours per RF-5A and 15 flight hours per RC-47.

? ie they don't use it ?

Surveillance of Communist Rear Areas:

- From the standpoint of the military intelligence mission, which operates on both a highly general level (national estimates, current intelligence for national policy makers) and a highly specific level (order-of-battle studies, quantitative appraisals of logistic movements, etc.), DIA considers BUFFALO HUNTER a primary source of intelligence on Communist rear service activity. In the past it revealed development of the highlands logistic route, North Vietnam's most important link to southern South Vietnam. It documented construction of Dong Ha, the Communists' largest port in South Vietnam. And it provided the bulk of the information from which DIA photo-interpreters and analysts estimated the quantity of supplies the Communists have stockpiled in South Vietnam -- enough to sustain them in heavy combat for over a year. BUFFALO HUNTER has also confirmed the movement of weapons systems into areas where they had not previously been identified, such as the movement of radar-controlled antiaircraft artillery into GVN MR 3. This variety of intelligence has proven to be a key element, in the opinion of DIA analysts, in estimating Communist capabilities and intentions in South Vietnam.

Warning:

- DIA also believes BUFFALO HUNTER has the potential to confirm indications of an impending Communist general offensive. If the Communists were to attempt such a blow -- in the fashion of Tet 1968 or Spring 1972 -- DIA believes

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they would move their strategic reserve divisions southward from North Vietnam, which would necessitate logistic movement from stockpiles inside South Vietnam. This movement of supporting arms probably would be detected -- or more likely confirmed -- by BUFFALO HUNTER.

4. Thus in the view of the military intelligence services, BUFFALO HUNTER's value lies in two principal areas: (a) its contribution to U.S. and VNAF contingency targeting, and (b) its contribution to U.S. knowledge of the situation in South Vietnam. The impact of placing the program's assets in a contingency status in CONUS during FY 1976, therefore, depends to a large extent on the answer to two questions:

- Do U.S. policy makers consider a viable U.S. or VNAF contingency targeting program necessary?

- What quality of intelligence on Vietnam will U.S. decision makers require beyond FY 1975?

? Fair question

5. On the first question above, without BUFFALO HUNTER the VNAF will be deprived of its "eyes" in the Communist rear areas in South Vietnam. The VNAF is not now carrying out any regular program of strikes in these areas, but without BUFFALO HUNTER it would be impossible for the South Vietnamese to pre-plan strikes against potentially vital targets such as stockpiles and transportation facilities. In the event of a Communist general offensive, the immediate launching of such strikes could go a long way toward blunting Communist momentum. In other words, the absence of BUFFALO HUNTER photography prior to a Communist offensive would degrade the ability of the Vietnamese Air Force to counter that offensive.

? ?

6. On the second question above -- "what quality of intelligence on Vietnam will U.S. decision makers require beyong FY 1975" -- DIA analysts believe that without an operating BUFFALO HUNTER program the U.S. intelligence picture of Communist activity will lose considerable detail. DIA points out that it will be unable to answer with as much confidence as at present such questions as:

- What is the ability of North Vietnam to support a general offensive in the South?

- Are large Communist units on the move through rear areas?

- Have any new weapons systems moved into South Vietnam? And are they of Chinese or Soviet origin?

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- Is there a logistic buildup underway?

- Where are the Communists building roads?

DIA believes that the decline in our ability to provide detailed answers to these questions will significantly degrade our confidence in rendering more general judgments about North Vietnamese intentions and capabilities.

7. Alternative collection systems: High altitude photo reconnaissance, human-source collection and SIGINT would presumably continue after a redeployment of BUFFALO HUNTER to CONUS. Although each of these sources makes a valuable contribution, DIA analysts believe that none is as reliable, consistent, or yields data with as much definition and certainly as BUFFALO HUNTER. As indicated earlier, high altitude photo reconnaissance is rendered useless for parts of the year by cloud cover. Human sources that can report reliably on the areas that BUFFALO HUNTER covers are rare. And SIGINT remains valuable only as long as Communist communications security practices permit. DIA analysts therefore believe that deactivation of BUFFALO HUNTER will significantly degrade the ability of military intelligence to discharge its current mission in Southeast Asia.

8. The option of redeploying BUFFALO HUNTER back to Southeast Asia from CONUS does not affect any of the above considerations. In DIA's view, the movement of BUFFALO HUNTER back to Southeast Asia would presumably only be carried out after some dramatic development like an all-out Communist offensive. By then it would be too late for contingency targeting, too late to obtain the intelligence we might have garnered from surveillance of Communist rear areas, and too late to take advantage of BUFFALO HUNTER's warning capability.

9. The redeployment of BUFFALO HUNTER back to Southeast Asia, however, would have considerable value in terms of enhancing the tactical intelligence available to the RVNAF after a Communist all-out offensive had begun. As presently estimated by the U.S. Air Force, BUFFALO HUNTER could redeploy from CONUS and within 15 days be operating at a rate of 15 sorties per month. Within 30 days, the current average of 25 missions per month could be resumed. Once it had returned to Southeast Asia, BUFFALO HUNTER would be able to support whatever type of aerial operations were underway -- close air support, armed reconnaissance, flak suppression, interdiction, etc. It could also supply photography for support of ground combat, and for determining armor and artillery strength and dispositions. DIA notes, however, that BUFFALO HUNTER could only provide raw photography. A film processing unit and staff of photo interpreters would also have to be available to the field to process that photography into useable intelligence.

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10. DIA Conclusion and Recommendation: DIA analysts believe that in the final analysis, the question of whether to continue BUFFALO HUNTER missions as currently scheduled or to place the BUFFALO HUNTER assets in a contingency status in CONUS during FY 1976 hinges directly on U.S. policy toward Vietnam. If the current U.S. policy toward South Vietnam is to be continued, then BUFFALO HUNTER assets should remain in place to provide the required intelligence support to U.S. decision makers, U.S. contingency plans, and to the South Vietnamese.

11. The current dry season campaign, extending from now through May 1975, will be a critical period for large-scale military operations in South Vietnam. The whole intelligence community expects moderate to heavy combat in Vietnam during these months. DIA believes that at a minimum the decision to remove BUFFALO HUNTER assets to CONUS should not be made until late next spring, when the outcome of this dry season's fighting will be known. At that time, a decision on whether to continue BUFFALO HUNTER missions in FY 1976 can be made in the light of the general military situation, and in the light of then-existing U.S. policy toward Vietnam.

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CIA Comment

12. In the paragraphs above, DIA analysts have expressed the view that BUFFALO HUNTER provides essential information in three broad categories -- targeting information, surveillance of Communist rear areas, and warning of a Communist general offensive. CIA analysts on Indochina do not presently work on the targeting problem, which is exclusively handled by the military intelligence agencies.

13. As for the other two categories of information -- surveillance of Communist rear areas and warning of a general offensive -- CIA analysts do not believe that BUFFALO HUNTER photography makes as vital and important a contribution as DIA analysts do. In these areas, CIA analysts use SIGINT, high altitude photography and human-source reporting as primary sources, and BUFFALO HUNTER as a supplementary source which provides additional detail. With respect to significant changes in North Vietnamese intentions and capabilities, CIA analysts believe that other intelligence sources have been far more important. The targeting question aside, the placement of BUFFALO HUNTER on contingency status in CONUS would not seriously degrade our ability to make estimates in these areas. Specifically, CIA analysts recognize that there would be a loss of detail on Communist

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construction activities, and a loss of confidence concerning logistic buildups and in detecting new Communist weapons systems in South Vietnam. But CIA analysts believe that such losses would be acceptable.

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State/INR Comment

14. The withdrawal of BUFFALO HUNTER would provide a political signal to both Saigon and Hanoi that the U.S. was reducing its tactical military support to South Vietnam. For Saigon, the reduction in intelligence, besides making the military's job more difficult, would be a psychological blow, coming on top of more newsworthy indications of dropping American support such as Congressional reductions of funds. For Hanoi, the withdrawal would mean that American congressional aid limitations were being felt in operations in South Vietnam. This would provide a modest psychological boost for the North, although it would not of itself affect their operational plans.

15. For these reasons, State/INR believes that, barring a change of U.S. policy toward South Vietnam, BUFFALO HUNTER should be retained in Southeast Asia through the current dry season.

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NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE OFFICERS
OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

DATE: 13 Nov 1974

TO: The Director

FROM:

SUBJECT: Intelligence Community Views on Returning BUFFALO HUNTER Drone Photoreconnaissance Assets from Southeast Asia to the U.S.

REMARKS:

1. The attached memorandum is for your information and background. Both Danny Graham and Bill Hyland have taken a personal interest in this memo, and have themselves edited and approved the views attributed herein to their agencies.

2. The memorandum was prepared at the request of [redacted] AD/DCI/IC, to assist the IC Staff in evaluating an ASDI proposal to put BUFFALO HUNTER in a contingency status in the United States.

WAC

Bill Christison

Attachment
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Copy No. 6 - DDCI
Copy No. 7 - ER
Copy No. 8 - DDI
Copy No. 9 - DDO
Copy No. 10 - AD/DCI/IC
Copy No. 11 - D/DCI/NIO
Copy No. 12 - C/DDO/EA
Copy No. 13 - C/DDO/EA/[redacted]
Copy No. 14 - C/OCI/EAPD/ICB
Copy No. 15 - D/OER/D/S
Copy No. 16 - NIO/SSEA
Copy No. 17 - NIO/RI

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Routing Slip

TO:

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1	DCI			11	LC		
2	DDCI			12	IG		
3	S/MC			13	Compt		
4	DDS&T			14	Asst/DCI		
5	DDI			15	AO/DCI		
6	DDA			16	Ex/Sec		
7	DDO			17			
8	D/DCI/IC		✓	18			
9	D/DCI/NIO	✓		19			
10	GC			20			

SUSPENSE _____
Date

Remarks: See my notes — I think our estimate of the likelihood of a major offensive is an important framework for this question — for which see your recent memo — On balance, in view of our # need, I'd pull it out —

DCI/~~DDCI~~

11/16/74

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